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The Ten Principles of Good Business Writing

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The Ten Principles of Good Business Writing

A writing teacher shares his secrets

LEARNING TO WRITE good business prose is a slow, difficult process. Along the way, people tend to make the same mistakes over and over again. Here, a longtime teacher of business writing reveals his 10 principles for jumping to the head of the class without years of study.

State your objective

How often have you read the title of a memo or document and decided to read no further? Compare these titles: *4Q Sales Report* versus *4Q Sales Up Overall: Widget Boom Carries Northeast Quadrant.* Because the second title summarizes the document, it allows you to decide quickly if you need to read it.

That writer has done a good job, saving you time. You should have the same respect for your readers.

For longer, more complex documents, you may not be able to summarize the objective in the title, subtitle, or first sentence. Still, consider stating the objective somewhere in the first few paragraphs. For example, after some introductory material on the importance of telephones, you might say, "The purpose of this document is to enable you to use a Touch-Tone telephone." If the reader doesn't need to learn that, he or she need read no further.

Note: If you can't easily state the objective of your document, maybe you should ask yourself if anyone really needs to read it.

Know your audience

Before you start writing, ask yourself, *Who will read this? What do they need to know?* Then write directly to that audience. Don't waste time trying to make it abstract, removing all the you's and I's. In many cases, those pronouns make your prose readable.

Stay on topic

One of the benefits of stating your objective up front is that you can always refer back to it. But writers often veer off topic anyway. For example, because they know a lot about the history of Touch-Tone telephones or where the technology is headed next, they include a lot of this information, instead of limiting themselves to how to use one.

Ask yourself, *What does the person I'm talking to need to achieve this goal?* If you're writing extensively about anything else, you're either writing the wrong thing or you've chosen the wrong objective.

Put your conclusion first and your evidence second

Many writers, especially those with science training, tend to hold off their conclusions until the end of a document. They expect their readers to "play along at home" as they present facts, forming conclusions to compare against theirs.

But readers don't want to work that hard. They want you to tell them the conclusion up front, then present the evidence to support it. If they agree with your conclusion, maybe they can stop reading after the first paragraph, saving time. If they are doubtful or surprised, they can study the evidence with a skeptical eye.

The scientific method—performing experiments, analyzing results, then coming to conclusions—is a great way to think. But your writing doesn't have to mimic the thought processes that got you there. Unless you're writing for scientists who expect this format, cut to the chase and present the conclusions first.

Use formatting techniques such as lists and subheads

A lot of business writing looks like a gray blob of text: no title or subtitles and few paragraph breaks. Nothing jumps out. Bad formatting makes the reader's job more difficult.

If your text looks like a gray blob, consider the following tricks:
- Insert a subhead every few paragraphs
- Use a heading for each of the points on your outline.
- Keep your paragraphs short.
- Every time you use a list, make it a bulleted or numbered list.

Emphasize major points using boldface, subheads, and lists

When skimming text—and we all skim, at least subconsciously—our eyes go first to vivid contrasts of black and white.

Is there a key sentence you want your readers to remember? Don't hide it: use formatting techniques to emphasize it. Make it a heading or make it the first sentence of a paragraph. If it has to be in the middle of a paragraph, put it in boldface. Anything that's bold and/or surrounded by white space will jump out at the reader.

Use simple sentences

Have you ever stared at a sentence in a document and wondered just what the writer had in mind? *Having experience working parameters through transition to the target computer system, moving backwards through the development plan it is best resourced.* Sure, that's a

lot of jargon, but the big problem is the sentence structure. If necessary, you could hack your way through the jargon—if you knew what the sentence should look like.

Subject-verb-object. When you use this simple sentence structure—ideally in

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short sentences—your reader can follow you through even the densest thickets. *I* (subject) *have* (verb) *experience working parameters through transition to the target computer system* (object). *The best resourcing* (subject) *moves* (verb) *backwards through the development plan* (object). It's still not pretty, but if you could learn the vocabulary, it might make sense.

Strengthen verbs

Sentences often lie inertly on the page. Such flimsy sentences are the result of weak verbs—especially forms of the verb "to be." By contrast, good writing jumps off the page with vivid, active verbs.

Consider this mundane example: *There are many advantages to such programs.* There's nothing wrong with the sentence, except that it's dull. It begins with the two most uninteresting words ever put together, "there are." A simple fix: *Such programs boast many advantages.* The fun, action-oriented verb "boast" hammers home the message that the program can be proud of its offerings.

Speak in your own voice, rather than using (and potentially misusing) 50-cent words

It's always tempting to show off your vocabulary. But it's usually a bad idea. Ask yourself, *Do my readers know these words?* If they don't, would they really look them up in a dictionary? Or would they simply scratch their heads and move on? In that case, they won't understand your message. The big words will have caused you to fail.

The problem is made worse when you get the big word wrong. Rather than impressing the reader, you make a fool of yourself. Avoid this trap by striving to use the simplest possible words.

Spelchek!

It's true that you shouldn't rely on spell-check alone. Spell-check tells you that you've spelled *a* word correctly, not necessarily *the* word you want. For that you need to proofread. But what's astonishing is a blatant misspelling that the spell-checker would have caught. It shows that you didn't even take the time to investigate a squiggly red line on your computer screen. Show respect for your readers by paying attention to detail.

In the end, all writing boils down to a relationship with a specific audience. When you think of the reader as a *person receiving your message,* these 10 tips will become second nature to you.

— JOHN CLAYTON *is a writer and teacher at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana.*